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FM AMCONSUL JEDDAH

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9170
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 1380
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS PRIORITY 1458
RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH PRIORITY 6504
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 JEDDAH 000374

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RIYADH, PLEASE PASS TO DHAHRAN; DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ARP;
LONDON FOR TSOU; PARIS FOR ZEYA

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KISI](#) [KWMN](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SA](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#)

SUBJECT: AL-SAHAT: AFTER BRIEF SHUTDOWN, ACCUSATIONS THAT CONGEN JEDDAH IS "CORRUPTING SAUDI WOMEN"

REF: A. JEDDAH 263

[¶](#)B. JEDDAH 356

[¶](#)1. SUMMARY. Al-Sahat, a popular Arabic-language website frequently denounced as extremist, mysteriously went offline from April 18 to 22, sparking rumors the Saudi government had caused the site to be shut down. ConGen Jeddah and its officers are regular subjects of commentary, criticism, and the occasional threat on the site, and shortly after full access to the site was restored, an online debate ensued accusing ConGen Jeddah of forming a liberal, mixed-gender Saudi society and of bribing writers to attack a prominent Saudi columnist critical of USG efforts to promote women's rights in the Kingdom. The debate echoed an earlier discussion in which Embassy Riyadh was accused of bribing journalists to plant stories in the press. END SUMMARY.

AL-SAHAT: EXTREMIST MESSAGES, EXTREMELY POPULAR

[¶](#)2. Al-Sahat is an Arabic-language website consisting of a number of fora in which readers can post their opinions and join the debate on such topics as sports, cars, and computers, as well as political issues, terrorism, and Islam. Al-Sahat is based in Abu Dhabi, but most of the site's contributors come from Saudi Arabia. Since its establishment in the late 1990s, the site has been denounced regularly in the government-controlled Saudi media for the extremist views expressed by some contributors. Saudi posters have used the site to spearhead harsh campaigns against Saudi officials, including Ghazi al-Qusaibi, the Minister of Labor, and Iyad Madani, the Minister of Culture and Information, as well as liberal writers and public figures.

[¶](#)3. According to the Saudi-financed pan-Arab newspaper Asharq Alawsat, al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations and sympathizers have used al-Sahat to publicize their activities. For instance, one al-Sahat contributor, who went by the pseudonym Akhu man Ta' Allah, edited a magazine called "Voice of Jihad" and published it on al-Sahat, and, according to the Ministry of the Interior, was an active member of al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia until his arrest in May 2005.

[¶](#)4. Al-Sahat's owner Tariq Fares was reportedly offered 4,000,000 Saudi riyals (approximately \$1.1 million) for the site. Al-Sahat boasts more than 100,000 registered members, of whom 20,000 are thought to be active contributors. The site is now closed to new members, other than those "recommended" by a current member. According to Asharq Alawsat, membership is in such high demand that current

members can sell their recommendation or old log-in information for as much as 4,000 Saudi riyals.

AL-SAHAT GOES OFFLINE, SPARKING RUMORS OF SAUDI GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT

¶15. On April 18, al-Sahat readers were surprised to find the site unavailable. Abdullah Hasim, the assistant director of eCompany, the internet division of the United Arab Emirates telecommunications company Etisalat, attributed the site's going offline to technical difficulties. Al-Sahat went back online on April 22, but its political forum remained unavailable. Access to the political forum was restored on April 25, though discussions were, at first, more moderate than usual. By May 1, al-Sahat had returned to form.

¶16. Rumors circulated around Saudi Arabia that the Emirati government had shut al-Sahat down in response to pressure from the Saudi government. The King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology (KACST), the Saudi governmental authority responsible for censoring the internet, has in the past blocked access to al-Sahat from the Kingdom. A few weeks ago, KACST blocked the site for several hours after a particularly scathing posting accused Ghazi al-Qusaibi of "conspiring against Islam." Now that access to al-Sahat has been restored, at least for the time being, posters have been discussing alternative ways to communicate with one another should the Saudi or Emirati government shut the site down permanently.

CONGEN JEDDAH ACCUSED OF "UNLEASHING HIRED WRITERS" AGAINST SAUDI COLUMNIST

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¶17. ConGen Jeddah and its officers are regular subjects of commentary, criticism, and the occasional threat from al-Sahat contributors. Eyebrows were raised when, within hours of the May 12 shooting at ConGen Jeddah, the site carried a biography of the suspected shooter (reftel b).

¶18. On May 3, a poster wrote that ConGen Jeddah "has formed a liberal Saudi society for men and women that meets regularly at the Consulate" and, further, "is behind the agenda and speakers of the Jeddah Economic Forum." He went on to accuse the Consulate of bribing writers to attack Nora al-Saad, a columnist for the newspaper al-Riyadh, who has been critical of USG efforts to promote women's rights in Saudi Arabia. ConGen Jeddah, he wrote, "which is specialized in corrupting the Saudi Woman, unleashed its hired (or mad) writers to criticize the honorable Dr. Nora al-Saad." He cited an article published in al-Watan, the most liberal of Saudi Arabia's government-controlled papers, which, he claimed, was written by a Consulate "agent" and mocked al-Saad and "terrorized" her "by accusing her of belonging to al-Qaeda." The poster wrote that "these highly paid writers, who are influenced by the American Strategic Media and are highly ranked in their papers, are the tools of the 'American Democratic Islam Project.'" This online debate echoed an earlier discussion on al-Sahat, in which Embassy Riyadh was accused of bribing Saudi journalists to plant stories in the press (reftel a).

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